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What Makes a Good Teacher?

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As I draw towards the end of my career – I gave my first public lecture nearly fifty seven years ago and, as some of you know, I have written and edited papers and books on many aspects of education, including teaching – you have done me a tremendous honour in inviting me here, and another by translating my edited book on teaching. What can I do but to say 'thank you' – but saying 'thank you' seems such an inadequate response to this honour.

But as my career winds down, I have again started to ask some of the basic questions about teaching and learning and today I want to address three of them: what is teaching?, what is good teaching?, and what makes a good teacher? In a sense this paper is also a reflection on my academic career which I started as a lecturer in a College of Education preparing school teachers and when I moved into the University world as an adult educator, and I became involved in much of the early work in UK in the preparation of adult educators. Consequently, it has been one of my privileges to watch student-teachers mature into teachers and I have been able to learn from them as well as they learn a little from me – this does not make me a good teacher, only some one who wished that he was a better one, for the sake of those students with whom I have interacted over the years.

What is Teaching?

From the outset there are two very broad ways of tackling this first question: objectively, teaching is an occupation and the process of teaching has a number of different meanings and approaches; subjectively, teaching is an experience for each of us who teaches as we seek to fulfil our obligations to the students, our colleagues and the institution which employs us.

Objectively: I have used the word 'occupation' deliberately because I want to distinguish it from vocation, or even profession, although I do believe that most people who enter teaching do regard it as a vocation: they have a mission. But as Collins (1991) pointed out, many people in contemporary society are frightened by the idea of mission - yet omitting this element from teaching is to reduce it to an occupation and the teachers to mere mouth-pieces for those who have authority in society. Teaching is more than being a servant of the powerful and in Newman's (2006) terms teaching might actually become an instrument in helping the people to defy authority – and, therefore at the same time it becomes an instrument in forging or helping forge some form of democracy. Teaching then is a profession – in as much as we who teach profess. What do we profess?

In *The Theory and Practice of Teaching* I (2006, p.13) pointed out that teaching is changing – there are many new, or apparently new forms of teaching – but because its form has changed does

not mean that its essence has. Ideally, we become teachers because we want to work with others (children or adults), to share knowledge and expertise with them, and to help them grow and develop: perhaps, also, this will help create a better society. This then is the basis of our profession and I do not think that it changes even though teaching methods and modes of transmission change.

Subjectively: But for us as teachers – teaching is both a practice and an experience. We learn to do it – by doing it. But having learned does not take the emotions away from the practice as probably we all know and we are rarely trained to cope with the emotions. Brookfield (1990, pp. 2-3) sums up the feelings that I have also constantly experienced:

> Just when we think that we have anticipated every eventuality, something unexpected happens eliciting new responses and causing us to question our assumptions about the nature of teaching. Yet feeling unsure, realizing that our actions sometimes contradict our words, or admitting that we are not in control of every event in our practice are anathema to many of us. We believe that unless we are anticipating every eventuality and respond appropriately we are failing. Appearing confused, hesitant, or baffled seems a sign of weakness….

The model of the perfect teacher is a myth – I cannot tell you have often the night before I have had to give a lecture I have sat up much of the time worrying about what I was going to say, fearing failure, and so on. I am almost always nervous before any presentation. But after all these years, you might ask, don't you have confidence in your own knowledge/ability? Yes – but some confidence is not enough. The title of one of Palmer's books (1998) tells its own story – it is *The Courage to Teach.*

But then there is the other side of that experience, the thrill of seeing our students grow and develop, often as a result of what we have tried to teach them. It is the sheer joy of knowing that in some small way I have been able to be of service – for that is also what makes a profession.

Definition: These are some of our experiences as teachers as we seek to use our expertise to be of service to others – primarily to our students. While there are many different definitions of teaching, some of which are recorded in the first chapter of the book that you have so kindly translated, I would say that fundamentally teaching is the process of offering others, usually our students an opportunity to learn. However, there is one awkward philosophical question that we may want to raise at this point – what if our students do not learn – have we still taught? Teachers offer the opportunity to the students but, ultimately they cannot make them do anything and so, in this sense teaching is about the teachers' actions and intentions rather than the students, and so…

What is Good Teaching?

The word 'good' has so many connotations that it is difficult to define it: the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* offers about twenty different approaches to defining the subject and so it is impossible to restrict it to one thing. However, I want to ask here six questions about what is good in teaching to see if we can begin to clarify this situation – they are about: high pass rate; knowledge;

technique; vision; wisdom; concern.

Pass Rate: What if teachers achieve a 100% pass rate with every class – does that make them good teachers? Clearly it is very desirable that teachers achieve such an outcome and it suggests that they are successful teachers – but success is not the same as good! We may not know what methods were used or what potential harm might have been done by using certain teaching methods; consequently, we may ask - does the end justify the means? Helping students pass examinations is not the only end-product of teaching, because, amongst other things, we do not know what type of teaching methods the teachers have employed. Additionally, the pass rate may not be the final outcome of the course – what would we think if none of the successful class wanted to pursue that subject in further studies or if none of the students wanted to be taught by that teacher again? These are other end-products and they may be just as significant in deciding criteria for good teaching.

By contrast, what about a situation when a teacher teaches a class who do not like the topic, or do not like the school/college itself, but as a result of the class some of the students decide that they now like the subject or that they decide school is not too bad after all and that they want to continue? The teacher may not have achieved a 100% pass rate but the students' changed attitudes may be an indicator of success.

The pass rate, therefore, may be one criterion in deciding the nature of good teaching – but it is not the only one – and the overall outcomes, if we could ever know them, might be better ones.

The Level of the Teachers' Knowledge: Ideally, teachers should be very knowledgeable about the subject that they teach – but knowledge itself is not static and some forms of knowledge change more rapidly than others. Consider, for instance, the rate of change of technological knowledge. I remember when I was going to purchase a new computer and when I got to the store and saw the choice I was not sure about what I was going to buy. Indeed, when I eventually decided, I wondered whether I should buy it at the time or whether I should leave it a week or so to see if a newer version came out. You probably know the feeling – I left it and within three weeks a newer version came onto the market and the one that I wanted was a lot cheaper. Technology and some science subjects change extremely rapidly, but others such as ethics change less rapidly, and so this makes differing demands on teachers. Teachers should be knowledgeable about their subjects and so teachers are expected to pursue continuing education in order to be knowledgeable – but we see that different subjects do make different demands on teachers and educational planners might need to take this into consideration.

Teachers must have more than sufficient knowledge to teach their subject at the level demanded by the class – but this does not mean that they all have to be abreast with every aspect of new research in their field. Naturally, the more knowledge they have, the more they can be of service to their students but they do not need to know almost everything about their subject in many forms of teaching – but they do need to have sufficient knowledge about it to teach their students at the students' level and this is our responsibility as well as that of the educational administrators. But because teachers have that knowledge, it is no guarantee that the students will pass the course.

Knowledgeable teaching, therefore, may be another criterion in deciding the nature of good

teaching – but again it is neither the only nor the most fundamental one!

The use of good teaching techniques: In my book *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: theory and practice* (Jarvis, 2010. p.141-148) I mention four types of teaching – didactic, Socratic, facilitative and experiential. In addition, I discuss over thirty different teaching methods and I know that I have not included them all there. We now also have both e-learning (electronic) and m-learning (electronic and mobile), and so there are literally many new technologies as well as new techniques in education. Professional teachers should be good technicians and be able to use efficiently many different techniques and perhaps more than one technology. Indeed, teachers should be able to employ a number of different methods during a course in order to respond to different students' preferences about learning but, as I pointed out in the book that you translated (Jarvis 2006) teaching is more than a technique – it is also an art - and so expertise in technique and technology may be another criterion in deciding the nature of good teaching but, like knowledge, it is not the only or even the most fundamental one.

The teachers' vision: Teaching is not just seeing the students in the class or even the advanced student being supervised – it is seeing what they can become. I think that I cannot explain this better than the great German philosopher Heidegger (1968, pp.14-15) when he wrote about the cabinet maker's apprentice:

> A cabinetmaker's apprentice, someone who is learning to build cabinets and the like, will serve as an example. His learning is not mere practice, to gain facility in the use of tools. Nor does he merely gather knowledge about the customary forms of the things he is to build. If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within the wood – the wood as it enters into man's dwelling with all the hidden riches of its nature. In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. Without that relatedness, the craft will never be anything but empty busywork, any occupation.

Teaching is a craft like this – like the apprentice we should relate to our students and see the potential person who 'is slumbering within' the being with whom we interact. Just as the thrill of seeing students grow, mature and achieve that potential, perhaps my biggest sadness in teaching is to see students who do not achieve that vision and who fail – for instance, one adult student who already occupied a senior position when she decided that she wanted to research for a PhD and for whom I had really great hopes when I began to supervise her did not grow and develop and sadly when she submitted her thesis, she was referred: she had not grown. But also sadly she actually no longer wished to communicate with me again since in some way she blamed me for her failure. I have supervised about 40-50 doctoral students and she was one of only two who did not pass and I will be sad about both of those for the remainder of my life. Like the apprentice, we must have a vision of what the students can become as a result of their learning. But visions without practice and success are but of very little value.

The teachers' practical wisdom: Few scholars would include the teachers' wisdom as a criterion for good teaching – but over the past few years I have been thinking about both forms of

wisdom – both abstract meaning and practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is not something that we set out to learn but it is a by-product of many things that we do – it is tacit knowledge: this is precisely the philosophy behind Aristotle's claim:

> What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience... (Aristotle VI.8 p.148)

However, it is not age *per se* that is the basis of practical wisdom but learning from experience: teachers learn from their experiences and the longer their experience the greater is the chance that they have achieved wisdom – this is the tacit knowledge of teaching. The wise teacher may be able to cope with many of the unexpected happenings of the classroom and with the difficulties that weak students face. Wise teachers may be able to use all their experience to make the teaching and learning stimulating but we can learn another lesson from Heidegger (1968, p.15) when he makes the point about how difficult teaching is – far more difficult than learning because we must not get in the way of the students' learning:

> The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces that impression that we properly learning nothing from him…If the relation between the teacher and the taught is genuine, therefore, there is never a place in it for the know-all or the authoritative sway of the official. It is still an exalted matter, then, to become a teacher… (Heidegger, 1968, pp.14-15)

Wise teachers never get in the way of the learning – what they do is to create the space that enables learning to occur. This does not mean that teachers should not intervene in the process when it is necessary – they have a responsibility to contribute content to the processes of learning but the contribution should always be made bearing in mind the students' needs. Learning space, says Palmer (1983, pp.69-87) has three major characteristics – openness, boundaries and an air of hospitality. Openness is literally what it says it is – it is something that we teachers must not fill for our students, but this space has its boundaries in which the learners seek the truth. However, there is one aspect of that space to which there is no boundary – and this is where those thoughts and skills can take us as we think about them – we can keep on pursuing the truth hidden within the topic of our thoughts and, as Levinas (1991) suggests this can be an infinite process. Teachers can assist in the processes of reflection but only the learners can actually reflect and pursue their thoughts *ad infinitum*.

But this space must be hospitable to new teachers, new ideas – sufficiently hospitable to make even the painful things about learning possible since new ideas are not always painless. For instance, Sennett (2008, p.6) suggests that the good teacher might impart a satisfying explanation but a great teacher unsettles, bequeaths disquiet and even invites argument. Even more, the great

teacher leaves space for the learners to dwell on these things so that the thoughts can grow, expand and become more meaningful.

The teachers' concern: Throughout my work on teaching I have always argued that there is a moral relationship between the teachers and the taught, as I have in the book that you have translated (Jarvis, 2006, pp.39-52) – we are always responsible for the stranger who comes into our midst or as teachers we are responsible for the learners who turn to us for learning. Being responsible does not mean filling the students' space with our presence so much as creating the space in which they can learn – or as Palmer (1983, p.88) suggests, creating space so that 'obedience to the truth is practiced' together. This is a slow and gradual process of learning and internalising the truth of the subject in a moral relationship of teachers and taught. As Crawford (2005) has argued, in today's world, we do things too fast and we miss so much of the experience – in this case the experience of learning. By learning slowly and attentively, we appreciate each other more and we begin to understand the truth of the subject: we also begin to understand more of the spiritual dimension in the whole processes of learning and living. This, then, is the concern of the teacher – the concern for the other: that together we may share in a relationship of mutual concern and so realise our humanity and that none should be excluded from the learning community.

Conclusion – What Makes a Good Teacher?

Naturally there is much more to this topic than what we have mentioned in this brief presentation and some may well disagree with my analysis, but from what we have discussed, we may now be in a position to offer a definition of a good teacher. Good teachers, out of concern for the other (students) dedicate themselves, their knowledge and expertise to create space in a community of truth in which students and teachers together have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop their humanity in a lifelong process of learning.

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